

THE TEXAS FOUNDATION
FOR
ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL RESEARCH

POTTERY SHAPES & TERMINOLOGY

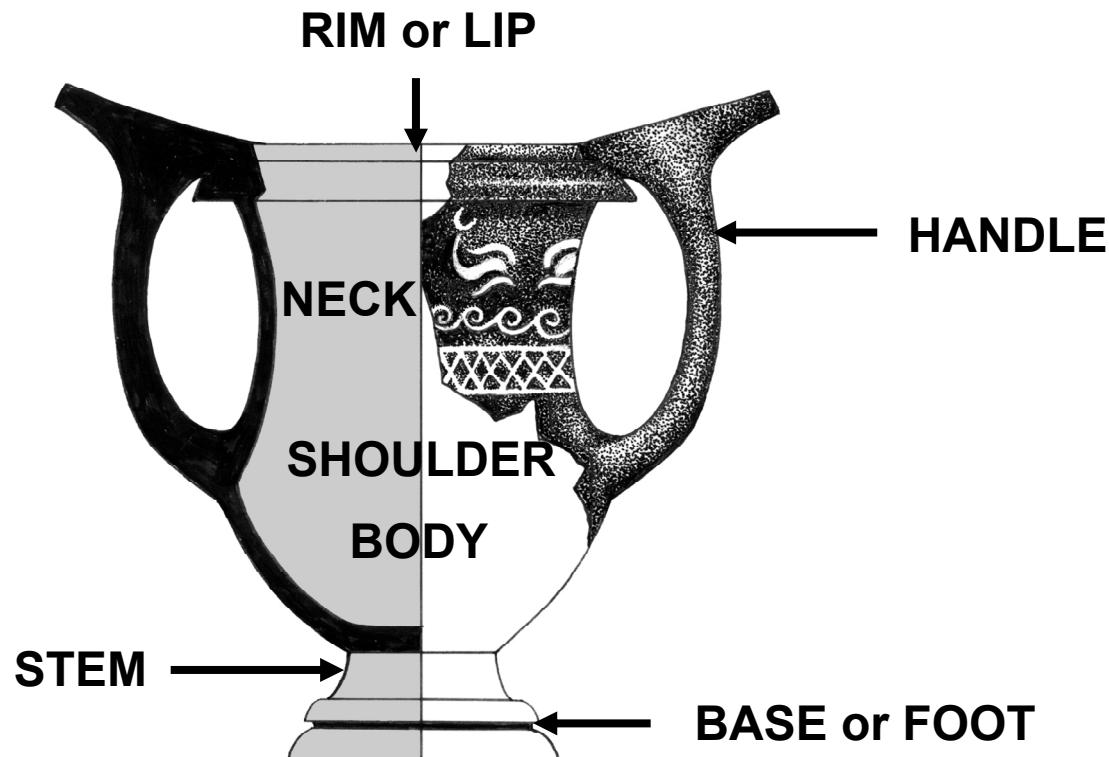


This presentation is designed to introduce the first-time archaeology student to some of the basic pottery shapes encountered on a number of TFAHR's excavations. Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted vocabulary even for classical pottery shapes, the terminology often varying significantly from site to site and archaeologist to archaeologist. Neither can we rely on ancient Greek or Latin terms, which were often used just as loosely by classical authors. The following TFAHR "lexicon-in-progress" should help as an introduction to basic ceramics terminology.

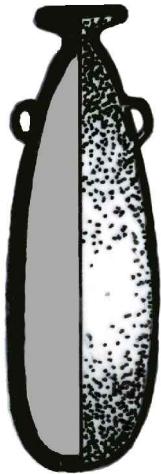


POTTERY PROFILE AND TERMINOLOGY

After a ceramic find (either a sherd or entire vessel) has been cleaned, identified and catalogued, a profile is made for future publication. The concept of the profile is to present both an exterior view and a profile “cutting” of the piece. For TFAHR publications, it is customary for us to present the exterior view on the right and the profile cutting on the left.



All photographs and pottery profiles are from the TFAHR Photo Archive, unless otherwise noted.



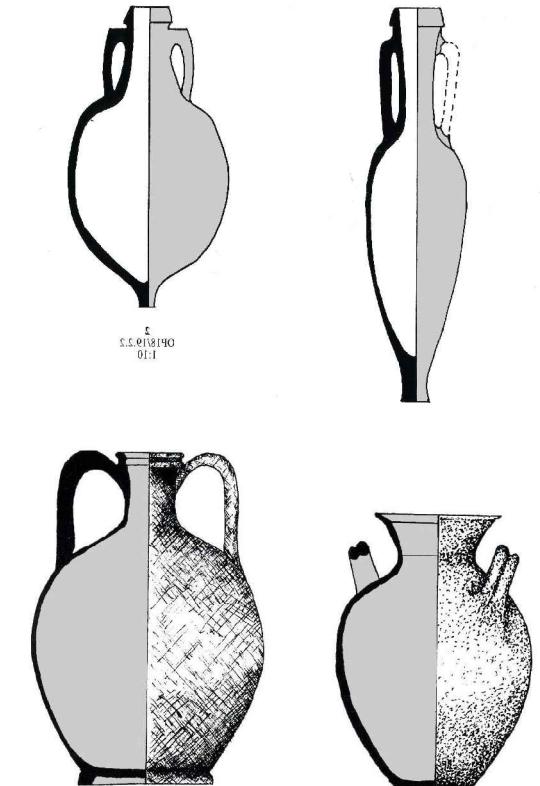
ALABASTRON (ΑΛΑΒΑΣΤΡΟΝ)

An alabastron is a small vessel of glass, stone, or terracotta that contains perfumed or scented olive oil. Traditionally it has a rounded bottom, a narrow neck, and two vestigial handles. When the two handles do form actual loops, that may be an indication that a string was run through them and the alabastron carried in such a fashion. The obvious connection with the word “alabaster” is probably due to the fact that the earliest such jars for scents and perfumes were made from the stone, or at least the more expensive ones were.

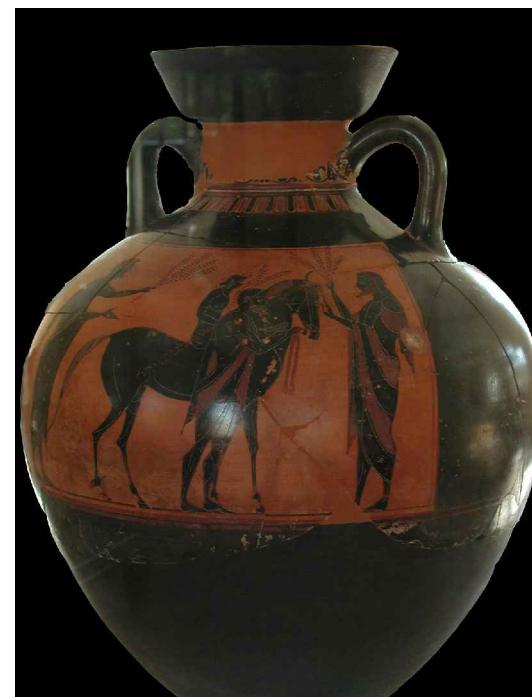


AMPHORA (АМФОРА)

An amphora is a two handled storage jar with an ovoid body. Often the base ends in a point, originally to facilitate stacking and storage in shipping (wine, oil, etc.). A flat based amphora is often called a “table amphora.”



Often the handles of amphoras are stamped with information regarding the vintner, manufacturer, or the point of origin of the contents within the amphora.



Amphoras were used for many other purposes besides the transport and storage of liquids, such as cinerary urns (above) and prizes (left).

AMPULLA

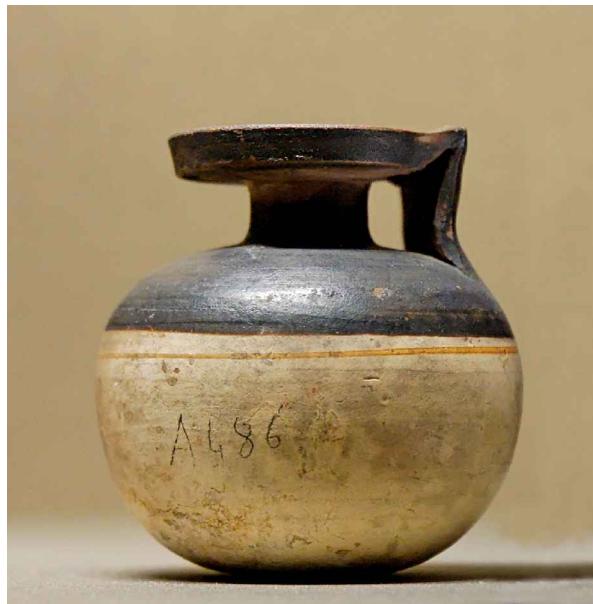
An ampulla, as its name implies, is a vessel with handles on both sides, much like an amphora. But an ampulla is small, usually about hand-sized and contained oils or unguents. In Christian times ampullae were commonly distributed at pilgrimage shrines, where the faithful received ampullae with oil consecrated at the shrine; often images of the saint, the shrine, or the pilgrimage to the shrine decorated the vessel. The shape of the ampulla is closely related to that of the pilgrim's flask.





ARYBALLOS (ΑΡΥΒΑΛΛΟΣ)

An aryballos is a small globular vessel with a very narrow neck, almost always with just one handle, and a large flaring rim. The aryballos contained olive oil. Many depictions show athletes carrying the aryballos by a rope as they walk to the gymnasium.



Credit: Wikimedia Commons, Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen

ASKOS (ΑΣΚΟΣ)

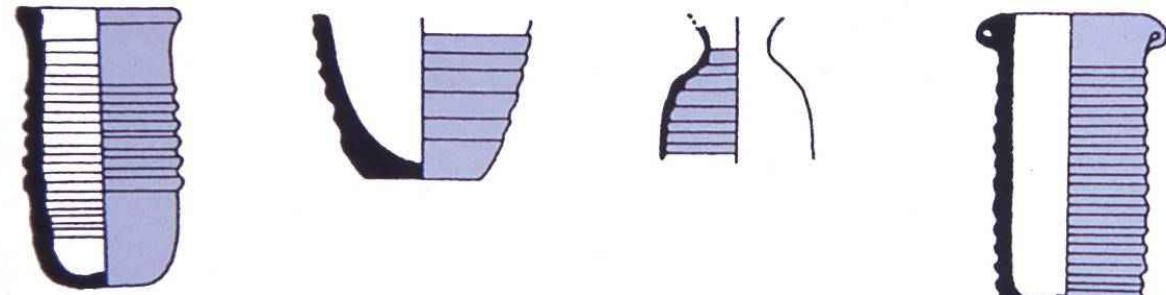


In Homer the word ασκος refers to a wine skin or a leather bag. Some of the earliest examples of the askos do, in fact, imitate its leather predecessor (left). The classical askos retains this squat shape and generally has a wide mouth and a single handle.



BEAKERS

Beakers are tall cylindrical drinking or measuring vessels. They usually do not have a foot but rather a flat or rounded bottom. Some beakers have vestigial handles that serve no practical function. Beakers are rarely decorated or painted.



BLACK FIGURE

The black figure style of ancient Greek pottery is characterized (as its name implies) by black silhouetted figures on the red background of the vessel. The figures often have incised outlines.

The technique of attaining the black figure was to paint with a slip the desired figure directly onto the pot. The firing required three stages: 1) the oxidizing stage in which air is let into the kiln, turning the whole pot the color of the clay; 2) the reduction stage in which green wood is added to the fire and the air supply reduced, turning the pot black; and 3) the final stage in which air is re-introduced into the kiln, turning the vessel back to its original color, except for the painted parts which retain their black color.



BLACK GLAZE



Black glaze echinoi.



Black glaze salt cellar.

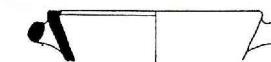
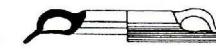
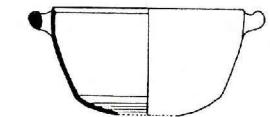
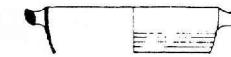
What distinguishes black glaze from black figure is that rather than individual figures being painted with a slip, the entire vessel (or at least a good portion of it) is covered with slip before being fired. If the vessel is improperly fired, the resulting glaze can turn out to be a reddish or brown color.



Black glaze sherd with graffito.

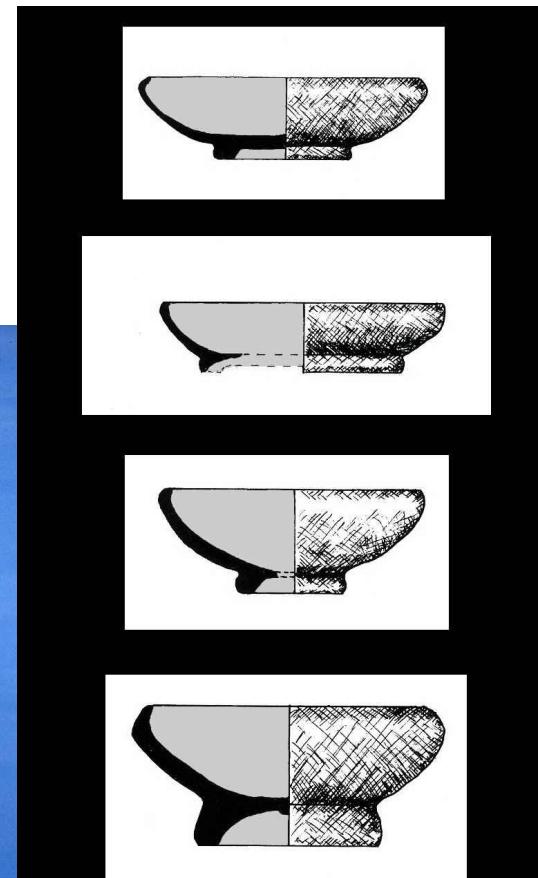
COOKING POTS / COARSE WARE / CHYTRA (ΧΥΤΡΑ)

Cooking pots are generally large, rough, undecorated vessels commonly referred to as “coarse ware.” The pots were usually placed right in the fire or into the coals. Many had lids that fit over the large, open mouth. Cooking pots come in a great variety of shapes and handle arrangements. In ancient Greek the simple cooking pot, was called a chytra (χυτρα).



ECHINUS (EXINOΣ)

The word **echinus** (which originally meant nothing more than “jug” in Greek) is now commonly used to refer to a bowl with its rim curved to the inside. There is usually a foot and the echinus can be glazed or unglazed.



GRAFFITO

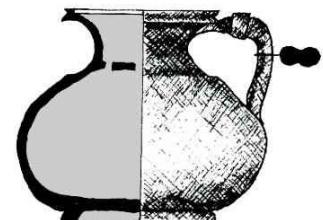
The term **graffito** (plural: **graffiti**) comes from the Greek *γραφεῖν*, meaning “to draw, scratch, or write.”

Consequently, a **graffito** can refer to a drawing or word scratched into something, like a potsherd or stone. In general, **graffito** does not refer to an inscription officially and deliberately carved into a stone or a word or image intentionally stamped into a vessel before it was fired. The use of the word **graffito** has the connotation of it being a later afterthought.



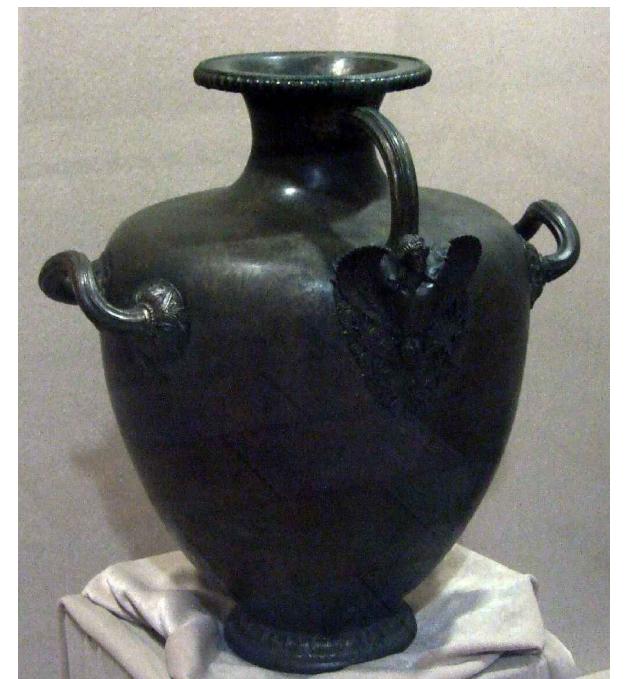
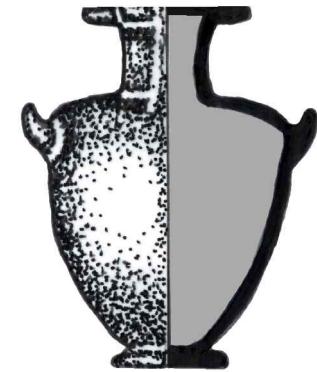
GUTUS

The gutus is a small globular vessel with a spout. It is used to pour olive oil into an oil lamp. Often there is a strainer built into the gutus to help strain out the impurities in the olive oil.



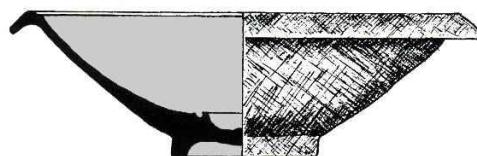
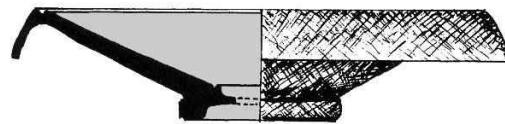
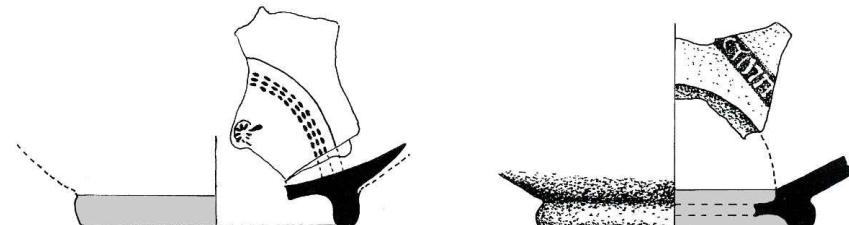
HYDRIA (ΥΔΡΙΑ)

As its name implies, the hydria is a water vessel, usually for transport or storage. The hydria has three handles: two are horizontal and one vertical. The two horizontal handles are for lifting the vessel, the vertical one for pouring and perhaps carrying, when the pot is empty.



ICHTHYA / FISH PLATE (ΙΧΘΥΑ)

An ichthya is used to serve fish. It commonly has a small well in the center to hold sauce. Fish plates can be glazed or unglazed and often have roulette decoration or incisions around the well.



KANTHAROS (ΚΑΝΘΑΡΟΣ)

The kantharos is a wine-drinking vessel of a very antiquated form. It can be glazed or unglazed. Most are two-handled, wide-mouthed, and footed and flat based. Many have painted decoration on the upper part of the vessel or molded decoration on the lower part.





Drawing wine from a bell-krater.

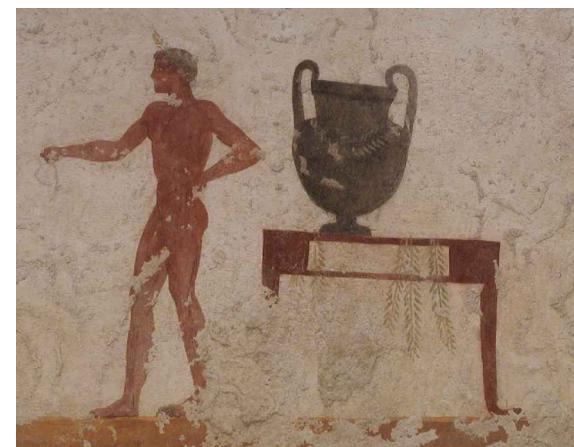
KRATER (KPATHP)

A krater, as its name implies, is a vessel in which wine is mixed, usually with water. It is a large vessel that comes in many distinctive shapes. The mixed wine is drawn from the krater and served into drinking vessels.

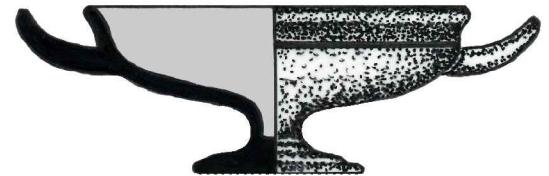


A calyx-krater.

Credit: Wikimedia Commons, Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen



A volute-krater.



KYLIX (ΚΥΛΙΞ)

A kylix is a drinking cup. Its traditional shape is broad and shallow, with two flaring handles, and a thin stem. They are often depicted as the favored cup on symposium scenes.





LAGYNOS (ΛΑΓΥΝΟΣ)

The lagynos was a type of wine jug popular in the Hellenistic period; lagynos is usually translated as “flask” or “flagon.” It is characterized by a long narrow neck, usually supported by a single slender handle, and a squat or globular lower body with a lid-like upper body.

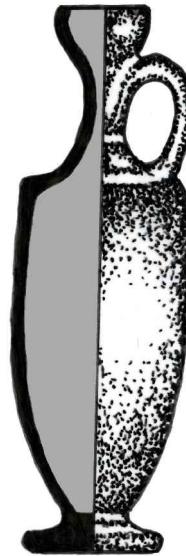
The surface of the upper body is often decorated with symbols alluding to the Dionysic cult, as would be expected in a wine vessel. Some scholars have concluded, however, that the

lagynos was a ritual vessel used exclusively in ceremonies honoring the god. Lagynoi of metal and terracotta have been discovered. The statue by Myron of Thebes (ca. 300 BC) entitled variously *The Drunken Hag* or *The Fisherwoman* depicts an intoxicated woman clutching a large lagynos.



LEKYTHOS (ΛΗΚΥΘΟΣ)

The lekythos is a small vessel for unguents, balms, or perfumed olive oil. It is usually flat-footed and can be made without a handle or with one vertical handle. The lekythos shape is very ancient and traditionally the lekythos was associated with funerals and burials. It contained a small amount of oil which was left as a votive or offering at the grave site.



LOOM WEIGHT

A loom weight is a pierced weight through which the woof (vertical) threads of a textile are run while the textile is on the loom. The weight keeps the textile taut while the warp (horizontal) threads are run through it. Loom weights come in many different sizes and shapes. They are often decorated with incised marks or stamps.



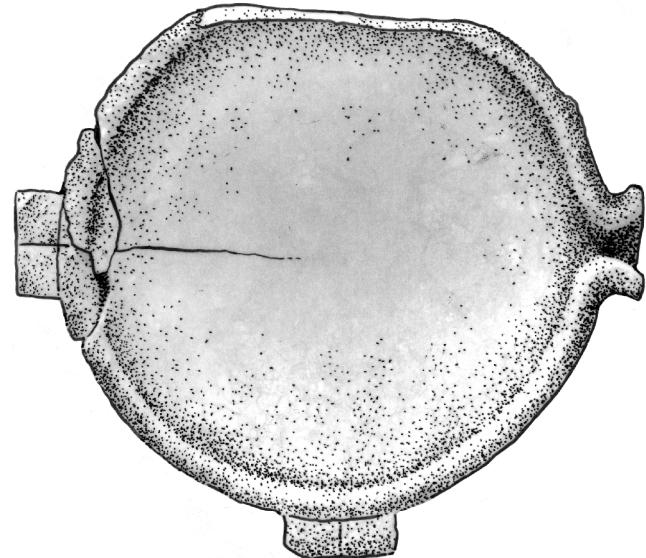
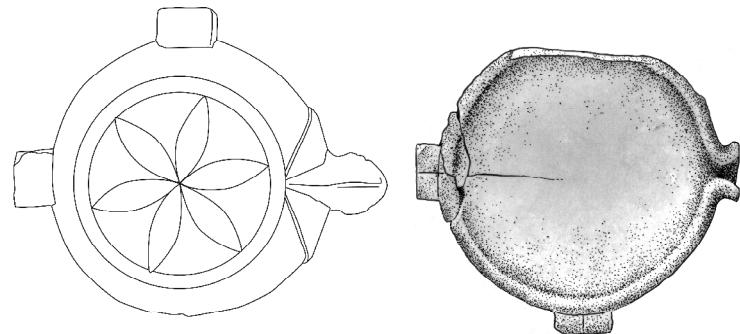
MOLD-MADE POTTERY

Instead of being thrown on the potter's wheel, mold-made pottery is pressed into a fired terracotta mold. It is decorated on the exterior and usually lacks a foot. It is often loosely referred to as "Megarian Ware," after Megara, one of the ancient centers of its manufacture.



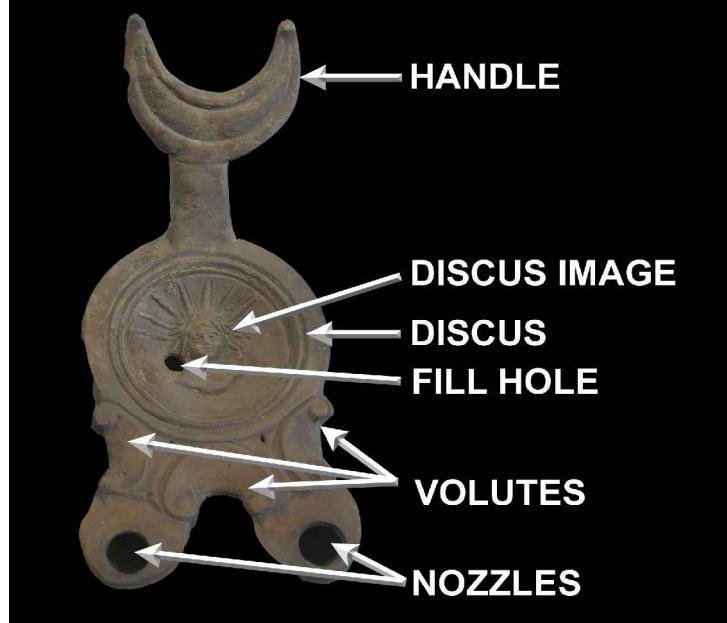
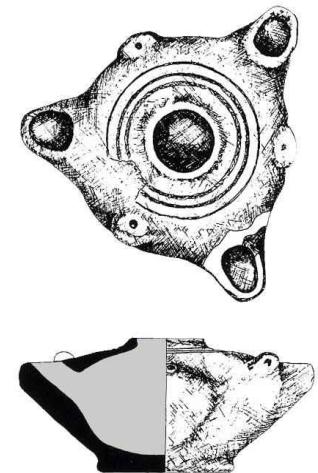
MORTARIUM / GRINDER

The mortarium or grinder is used for pressing or grinding juice from a plant or perhaps some very light pounding of grains or herbs. The mortarium found at Bylazora in 2008 was carved from stone. Like most mortaria it had two handles (one missing) and a built-in spout.



OIL LAMP (ΛΥΧΝΟΣ)

The oil lamp was the chief means of illumination in antiquity (See: TFAHR Historic Images – Ancient Oil Lamps). Its shape varied greatly across place and time. Many were made in halves in molds, joined, and then fired. Olive oil was the chief fuel.



OINOCHOE (OINOXOH)

The oinochoe is, as its name implies, a (wine-) pouring vessel. Its most distinctive feature is its trefoil or pinched spout, as compared to the spoutless olpe.



OLPE (ΟΛΠΗ)

An olpe is a small pitcher usually with just one handle and no spout, as compared to the trefoil spout of the oinochoe.



PAIONIAN GREY WARE

Amongst the Paionians (for a short history of the Paionians, see the TFAHR 2008 and 2009 excavation reports online) the most common terracotta ware is loosely referred to as “Paionian Grey Ware.” It is grey in color, wheel-made, occasionally slipped or burnished, sometimes utilizing the shapes of earlier periods, but more often being adapted to Greek shapes.



PITHOS (ΠΙΘΟΣ)

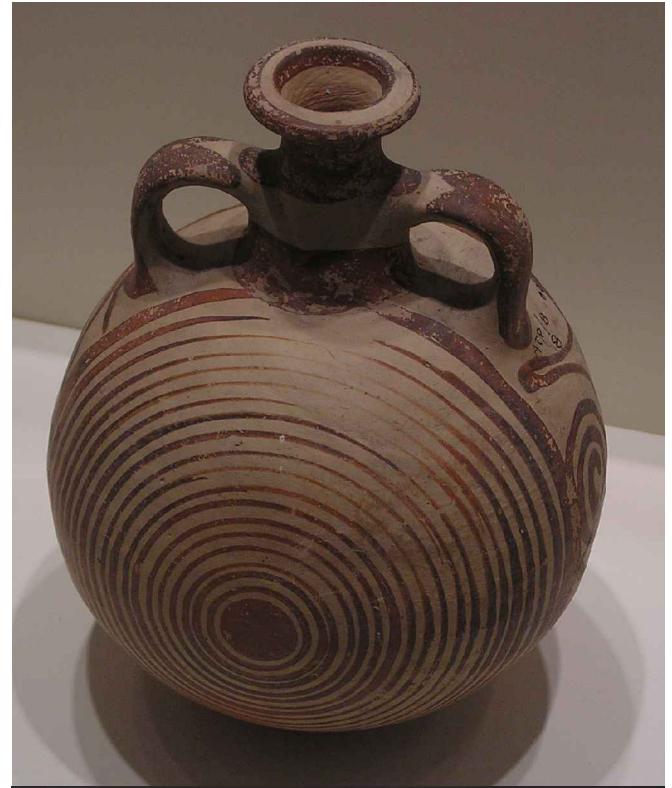
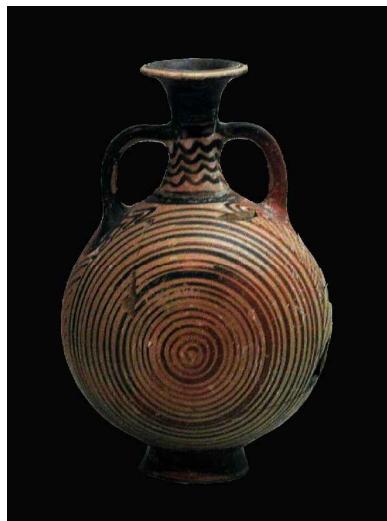
A pithos is a very large storage jar for grain or liquids. It is set partially into the ground, and once set in position usually not moved again. If a pithos was damaged, it was common to mend the pithos with lead clamps. A stone or terracotta disk covers the top of the pithos.



PILGRIM'S FLASK

The shape of the pilgrim's flask is essentially the same as that of the ampulla, but the pilgrim's flask is larger; it is two-handled, narrow-necked, and has a globular body, almost always without a foot (lower left is a rare exception). It gets its name from the fact that in the Middle Ages Christian pilgrims were accustomed to carrying wine or water in such vessels when they traveled. Although the terminology is medieval, the shape itself goes back to the Bronze Age in the Mediterranean and is thought to be a terracotta imitation of some sort of leather water bag or pouch.

Decoration is usually simple lines or circles, although Roman pilgrim's flasks, which were often mold-made, had raised decorations on them (right).



PYXIS (ΠΥΞΙΣ)

The term “pyxis” comes from the Greek *pyxos* (πυξος), the box-tree or the box-wood tree; pyxis, then, means a box made from box-wood. Now *pyxis* is generally used to refer to just about any type of small container. *Pyxides* can be made from metal, terracotta, ivory, or stone. Generally all *pyxides* have a lid of some sort. Most are flat based but some have elaborate feet, generally animal claws.

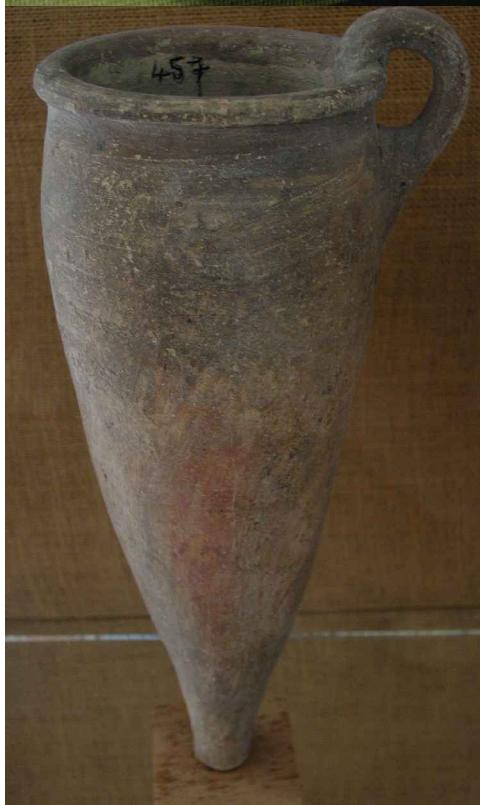




RED FIGURE

In contrast to the black figure vessel, red figure pottery is characterized by red figures on a black background. Instead of painting the individual figures with a black slip, the entire background except for the figures is painted with a black slip. The firing process is the same.





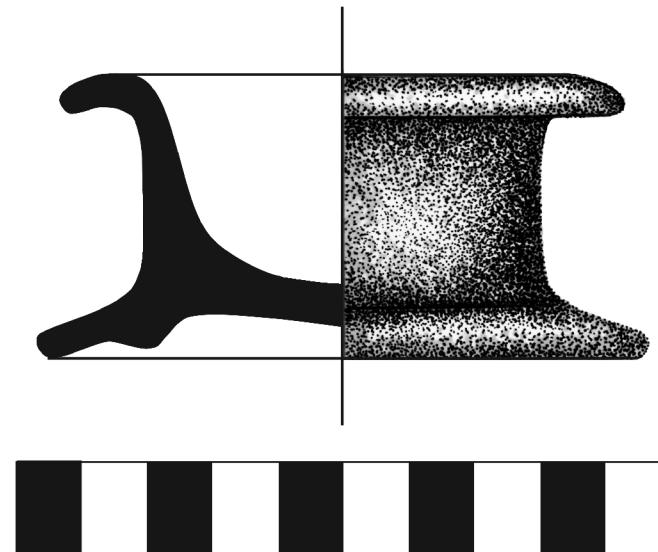
RHYTON (PYTON)

A rhyton is a drinking cup that can take many different shapes. Generally speaking, the term is now used to refer to flamboyantly shaped vessels, such as those taking the form of animals or men. Festive rhytons are often pointed at one end (to discourage setting down an undrained cup) and wide-mouthed at the other. They can be made out of terracotta, metal, or precious material, like ivory.



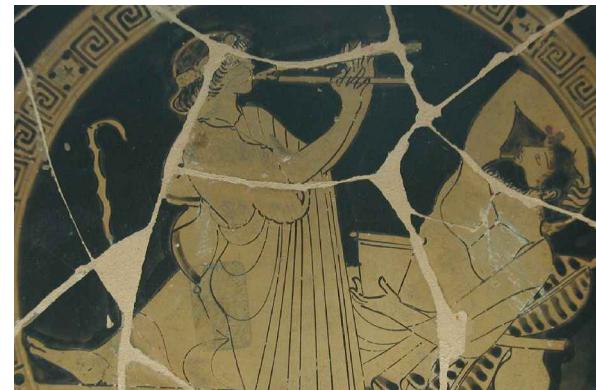
SALT CELLAR

The small vessels of a spool-like shape were dubbed “salt cellars” because of their resemblance to the Victorian era pot of a similar shape. Many archaeologists regard the salt cellar simply as another type of pyxis, but one usually without a lid. In fact, these small vessels could have had any number of uses.



SKYPHOS (ΣΚΥΦΟΣ)

A skyphos is a deep drinking vessel with two horizontal handles; it may or may not have a foot. The term refers to many different shapes and skyphoi are often depicted in symposium scenes.



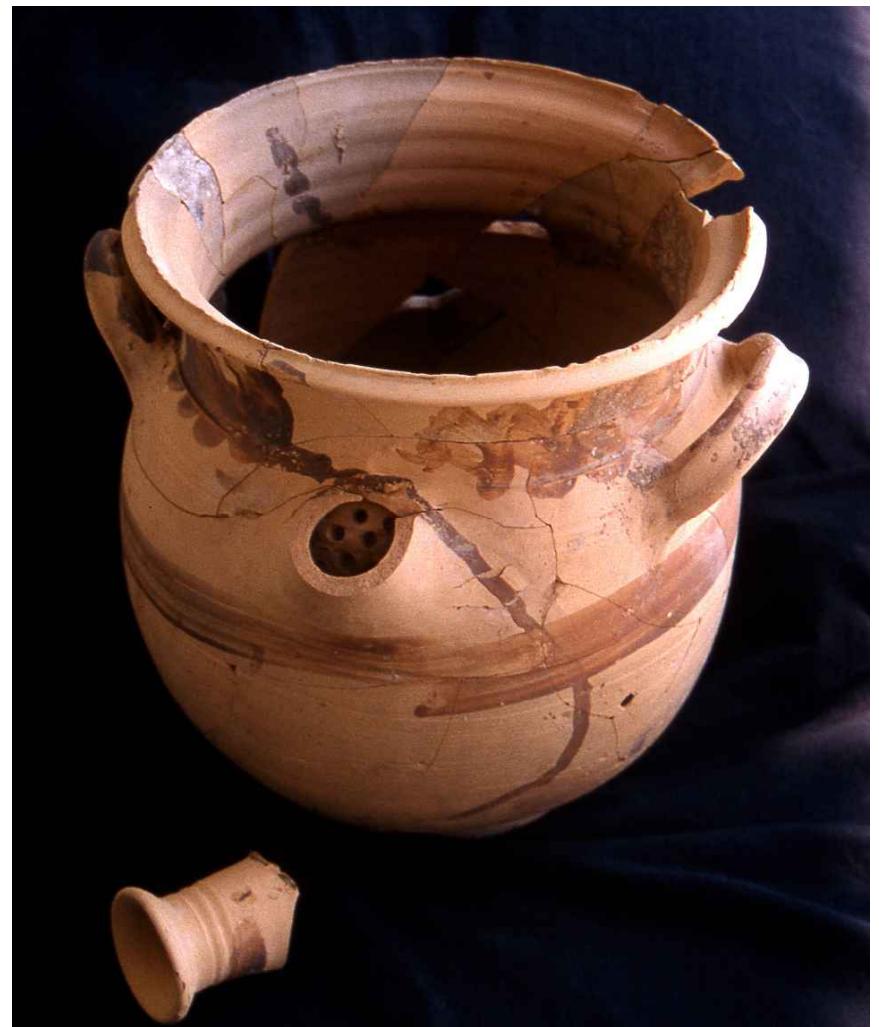
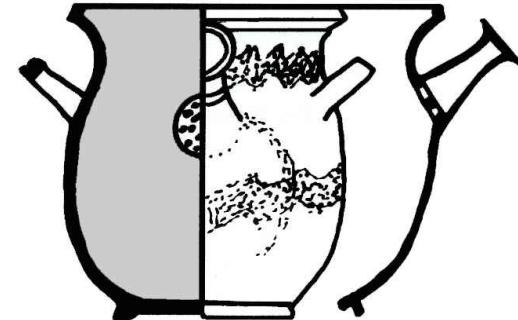
STAMNOS (ΣΤΑΜΝΟΣ)

A stamnos is a vessel for storing, serving, or racking off wine, that is, separating the liquid from the dregs and impurities. Although a stamnos generally has a globular body, there is a considerable variation in the shape and arrangement of the base, handles, and neck. It is a relatively rare type of vessel. Most commonly it has been found in sites in Etruria.



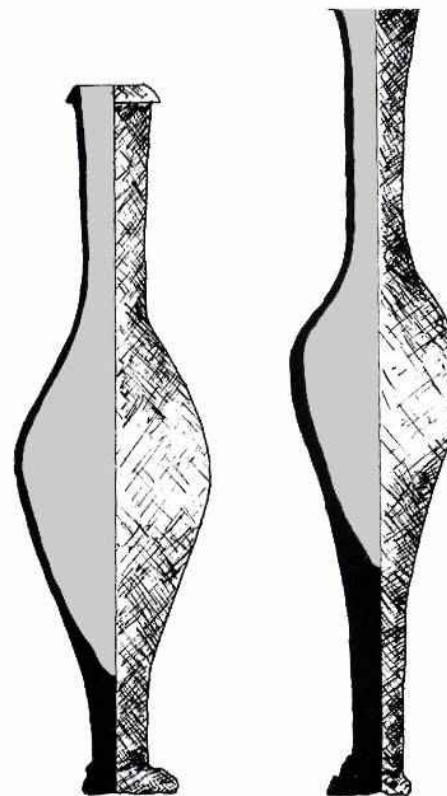
STRAINER

There are many vessels that have a strainer built into the spout. The exact function of this vessel (discovered at Ulanci, Republic of Macedonia) is uncertain. One idea is that it was used to ferment some beverage, like mead or beer. The strainer would filter out the impurities and solids in the liquid. Another theory is that it simply was used to strain the larger impurities out of some vegetable or fruit juice. The holes of the strainer are rather large.



UNGUENTARIUM

An unguentarium is a small, cylindrical vessel used to hold oil or oil-based perfume. Unguentaria are usually just a couple of centimeters tall and without handles. They have a bulge either in the middle or at the bottom of the vessel; some are flat bottomed and some are footed.





WEST SLOPE DECORATION

“West Slope Decoration” takes its name from the site where it was first discovered, on the west slope of the Athenian acropolis. It is a technique of painting, usually in white or beige, on an already fired black glaze vessel. It was developed in Athens in the late fourth century BC. Floral, marine, or geometric motifs are most common.

